PYRAMID POWER FOR COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

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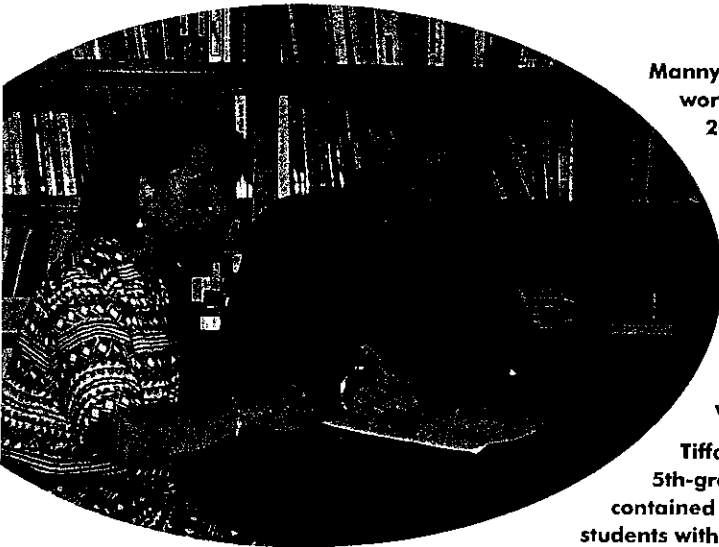■

Manny teaches 10th-grade world history to more than 200 students a day, including 12 students with learning disabilities. He is constantly frustrated because he cannot finish the textbook, as mandated by the school district. As he puts it, "I have 38 chapters to finish in 36 weeks. It's impossible."

Tiffany is a first-year 5th-grade teacher with a self-contained classroom. She has three students with learning disabilities in her classroom for social studies. Her concern is that she doesn't know how to incorporate planning for individual differences within her planning for the whole class.

Gina (a general education teacher) and Alyssa (a special education teacher) co-teach in a 3rd-grade inclusion classroom. They are anxious to make their co-teaching model work, but are in the process of defining their new roles and responsibilities. They want to coordinate their work so they can meet the needs of all students in their classroom.

This article describes a planning tool that can help both special and general educators with "covering the curriculum." This tool, the Planning Pyramid (Schumm, Vaughn, & Leavell, 1994), is designed to facilitate inclusion and collaboration.

Planning Pyramid

The Planning Pyramid is a framework for planning instruction to enhance learning for all students. The pyramid is particularly helpful in subject areas like science and social studies, which introduce concepts and vocabulary that are new to many students. It is a flexible tool that teachers can adjust to their personal styles of planning and teaching (Figure 1).

Degrees of Learning

The Planning Pyramid has three layers, the Degrees of Learning. The layer at the base of the pyramid—the largest volume—represents "what all students will learn." The middle layer represents "what most, but not all, students will learn"; and the smallest layer at the top represents "what some students will learn." The Degrees of Learning are based on the premise that although all students are capable of learning, not all students will

learn all the content covered. To guide their instruction, teachers might ask three questions:

- "What do I want *all* students to learn?" This content is represented by the large volume at the base.
- "What do I want *most* students to learn?" Shown by the middle layer, this is information that most students are expected to learn or grasp: supplementary facts and information about ideas and concepts presented at the base of the pyramid.
- "What information will a *few* students learn?" The top of the pyramid represents information that enhances the basic concepts and facts. For example, some students may decide to pursue a topic that he or she has read about in the text or that the teacher has mentioned or briefly discussed in class.

The Planning Pyramid is designed to help teachers prioritize curricular components and to help students focus on those critical components. Here are some important cautions:

- The pyramid is not meant to limit expectations for students or to limit student opportunities to learn. All students should have equal access to information that represents all levels of the pyramid.

- All students should have the opportunity to be exposed to the same information, although presentation of the information may vary somewhat according to the student's needs.
- Activities at the base of the pyramid should not consist of tasks or activities that are less stimulating (e.g., dittos, worksheets), nor should the upper levels be viewed as the place for creative and fun activities.
- Students *must not* be assigned to a particular level of the pyramid based on their academic ability. Students who learn at the middle and top levels do so based on their interests, prior knowledge, personal experience, or need for prerequisite skills.

Points of Entry

The second component of the Planning Pyramid is called the Points of Entry. Each axis, or point, of the pyramid represents one aspect of instruction: teacher, topic, content, student, and instructional practices. Each Point of Entry is guided by questions that help teachers plan lessons and courses (Figure 2). For example, two questions that pertain to students are "Will a language difference make comprehension of a particular concept difficult for a student?" and "Will there be students with high interest in or prior knowledge of these concepts?"

Collaboration Today

With the national trend toward inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, classroom teachers must plan lessons to meet the varying needs of students with disabilities, as well as academically talented or gifted students, students with limited English proficiency, and students who do not qualify for special services.

Although special educators have long served as consultants for their general education colleagues, more and more special educators are being asked—indeed, required—to work closely with general classroom teachers as collaborators. The realities of most general education classrooms can be daunting.

For example, most classroom teachers feel great pressure to complete state and district-mandated curricular objectives by the end of the school year (Schumm et al., 1995; Vaughn & Schumm, 1994). Teachers are expected to *cover the content* at a steady pace, without enough time to ensure understanding or learning by all students. General education teachers often feel that they have no choice but to "water down" the curriculum and reduce the quality or quantity of content coverage.
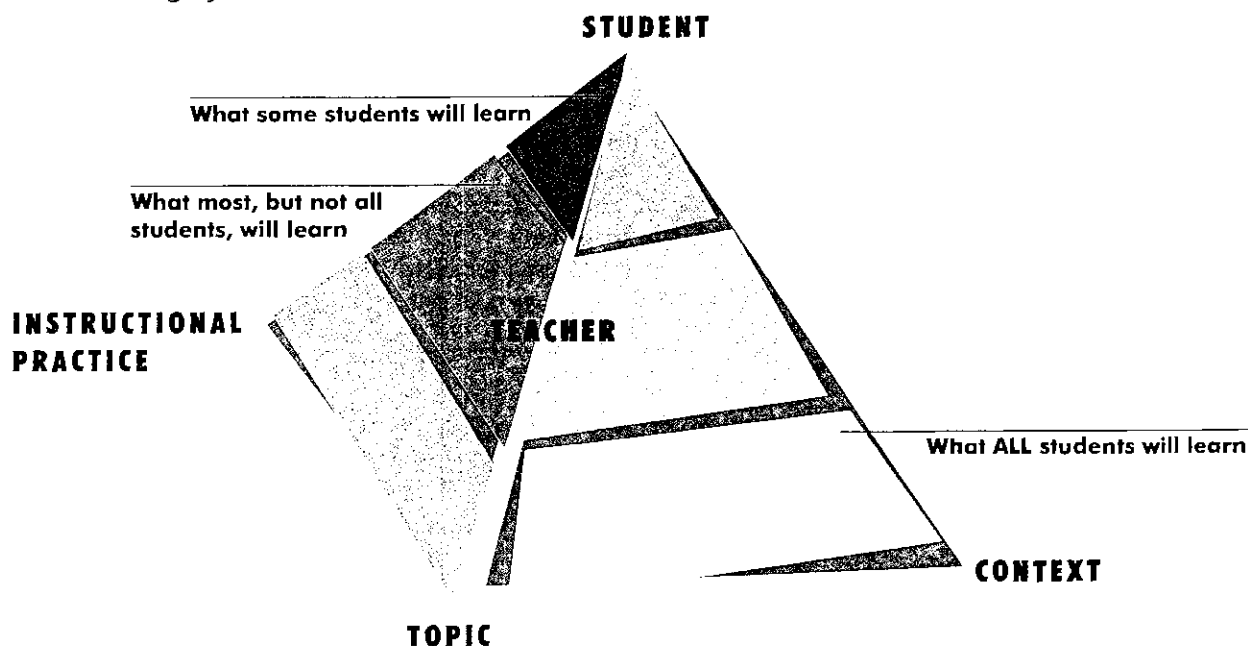
Figure 1. The Planning Pyramid

STUDENT

What some students will learn

What most, but not all students, will learn

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE

TEACHER

What ALL students will learn

CONTEXT

TOPIC

Figure 2. Questions Related to Each Point of Entry

1. Questions pertaining to the Topic:

Is the material new or review?
What prior knowledge do students have of this topic?
How interesting is the topic?
How many new concepts are introduced?
How clearly are concepts presented in the textbook?
How important is this topic in the overall curriculum?

2. Questions pertaining to the Teacher:

What prior knowledge do I have of this topic?
How interesting is the topic to me?
How much time do I have to plan for the lesson?
What resources do I have available to me for this unit?

3. Questions pertaining to Students:

Will a language difference make comprehension of a particular concept difficult for a student?
Is there some way to relate this concept to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of my students?
Will students with reading difficulties be able to function independently in learning the concepts from text?
Will a student with behavior or attention problems be able to concentrate on this material?
Will there be students with high interest in or prior knowledge of these concepts?
Will my students have the vocabulary they need to understand the concepts to be taught?
What experiences have my students had that will relate to this concept?

4. Questions pertaining to Context:

Are there any holidays or special events that are likely to distract students or alter instructional time?
How will the class size affect my teaching of this concept?
How well do my students work in small groups or pairs?

5. Questions pertaining to Instructional Strategies:

What methods will I use to motivate students and to set a purpose for learning?
What grouping pattern is most appropriate?
What instructional strategies can I implement?
What learning strategies do my students know or need to learn that will help them master these concepts?
What in-class and homework assignments are appropriate for this lesson?
Do some assignments need to be adapted for children with disabilities?
How will I monitor student learning on an ongoing, informal basis?
How will I assess student learning at the end of the lesson?

Using the Planning Pyramid in Collaborative Planning

We offer the following suggestions for special educators who collaboratively plan with general education colleagues using the Planning Pyramid:

△1 Identify one general education teacher with whom you will pilot the planning procedure in your school. Ask this teacher to make a commitment to planning at least two or three lessons.

△2 During the first meeting, explain the basic premise and components of the Planning Pyramid and plan one lesson. Start by discussing the lesson, using the questions from the Points of Entry as a guideline. Use the questions related to topic, teacher, students, and context to guide the initial discussion.

Identify concepts for each of the Degrees of Learning and record the concepts on the lesson planning form (see Figure 3). Use textbook objectives, state or district curricular guidelines, and personal judgment about the content to determine and prioritize content. As a special educator you can help your general education colleague identify areas of potential difficulty for students with disabilities and think about prerequisite skills or advance organizers they may need to be successful in learning key concepts.

Identify instructional strategies using the questions in Figure 2. At this stage, the special education teacher can be of most help. Often classroom teachers are unsure about how to teach students with disabilities and what adaptations can be made for them. You will need to be prepared to offer suggestions for instructional strategies and adaptations related to the following:

- Grouping (cooperative learning groups, student pairing).
- Presenting information (using advance organizers, modifications in pacing of instruction).
- Learning strategies (notetaking, reading comprehension strategies).
- Reading assignments (study guides, audiotapes of textbooks).

Be prepared to provide additional resources for teachers who may be unfamiliar with instructional strategies and adaptations for students with disabilities (Bos & Vaughn, 1994; Mercer & Mercer 1989; Schumm & Strickler, 1991; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 1997). If you co-teach, decide together who will teach what and how you will coordinate instruction and monitoring of students during the lesson.

List the sequence of activities or instructional procedures to implement the lesson plan on the "agenda" section of the lesson planning form. Keep in mind that this is the agenda for the lesson for all students and for all levels of the degrees of learning. Also list materials to be gathered and identify in-class and homework assignments. Finally, identify what method will be used to assess student learning. At this point, you may offer suggestions for the following lesson elements:

Figure 3. Lesson Planning Form

Date: _____ Class Period: _____ Unit: _____

Lesson Objective (s): _____

Materials	Evaluation

In Class Assigments	Homework Assignments

LESSON PLANNING FORM

Pyramid	Agenda
What some students will learn.	
What most students will learn.	
What ALL students should learn.	

- Adaptations in assignments (reducing the length of assignments, completing assignments orally rather than in writing).
- Tests (reading tests aloud to students, providing extended testing time).
- Informal monitoring of student understanding (asking questions, learning journals or logs).

Meet again for reflection after the lesson. Discuss how concepts at all Degrees of Learning were presented. Discuss what instructional strategies and adaptations worked well and what didn't work in respect to both academic and social outcomes. You may find it helpful to talk about students' reactions to the strategies and adaptations. Conclude the reflection session by thinking about how the lesson might be taught differently and about what lessons were learned that might affect future planning and instruction.

Evaluate the Planning Pyramid procedure after completing two or three lessons. Discuss improvements that you can make and pos-

sible new directions for using the pyramid with other colleagues in the school.

Implicit Planning Made Explicit

The Planning Pyramid may assist teachers with the new impetus toward collaborative instruction in inclusive classrooms. Directives and mandates about consultation and collaboration may seem vague, but we have found that the Planning Pyramid enables teachers to become more *explicit* about what they want students to learn and more proficient in planning instructional lessons that promote learning for *all* students.

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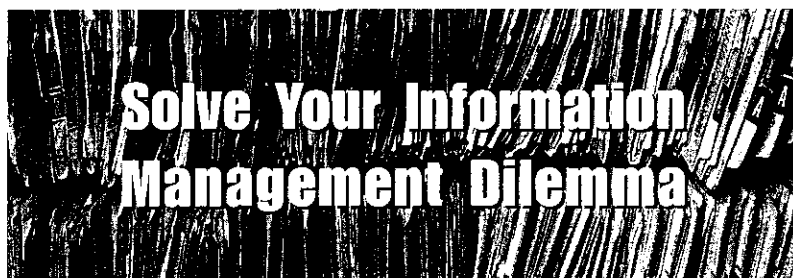
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